

Offenders receive job training at Airway Heights

Correctional Industries provides valuable skills for the workplace

By JAMES EIK
Staff Reporter

Select offenders at Airway Heights Corrections Center are receiving some invaluable real-world experience during their time at the facility, leading up to their release date.

Correctional Industries blends both business and government in an effort to provide offenders with much-needed workplace skills while also providing state facilities with various items, including furniture, clothing, office furnishings and commissary items.

The Airway Heights Corrections Center is the headquarters for a number of the Correctional Industries operations. Around 22 percent of the offenders in the program are employed at Airway Heights, making it the program's single largest entity out of the 1,300 offenders working in the state.

The facility houses medium-security offenders, which fits the demographics of the program.

"It has the audience we want to target," Correctional Industries director Lyle Morse said.

While the operation takes up a large building on the Airway Heights campus, the investment pays off. An estimated \$32 is returned to the state for every dollar spent.

"We don't focus on the profits, we focus on the benefit for the offender," general manager at Airway Heights Jim Parker said.

That said, the taxayers, according

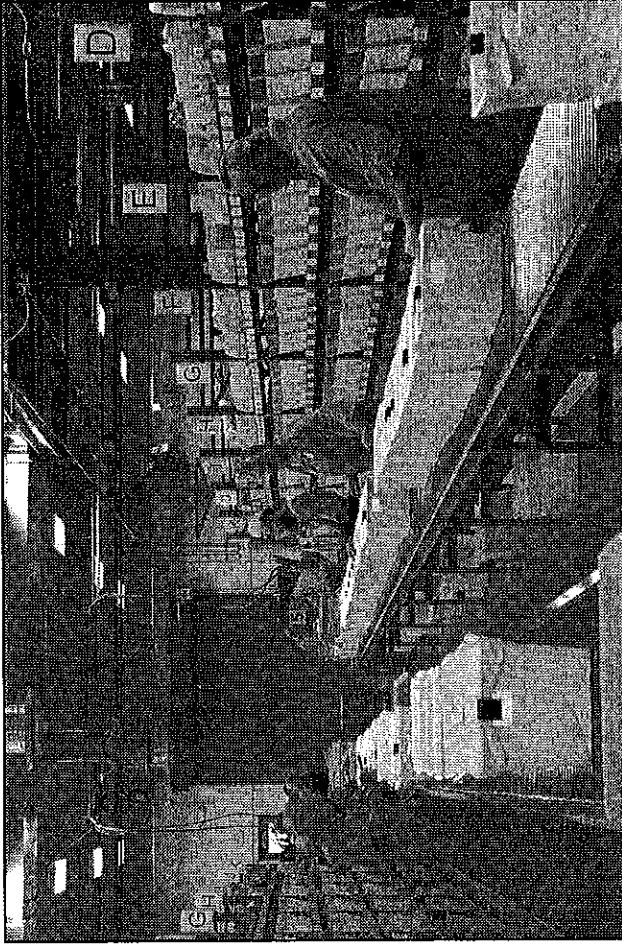


Photo by James Eik

Workers in the commissary at Airway Heights Corrections Center fill orders from other prison units across Washington state.

to have a high school diploma, GED or to Morse, don't fund the program. Instead, items are sold to state facilities, like jails, universities and other operations, at a price that makes up for the labor and cost of equipment.

"It sells on a business model to replenish the fund," he said.

Offenders working with Correctional Industries earn anywhere from 55 cents to \$1.60 per hour, with lead workers earning \$1.30 to \$1.60 an hour. The program is tier-based, and requires workers

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When they arrive in the facility, around 80 percent of the population was unemployed, and 50 percent were never employed.

Not all offenders are employed by Correctional Industries while at the facility, as it's a voluntary situation. Working, however, does have its benefits.

One of the larger parts of the operation at Airway Heights is the commissary,

where offenders are able to place orders for hygiene, food and other items. Offenders are able to spend some of their earnings on the higher quality items coming from the commissary. There are around 350 items on the commissary list from which offenders can order.

"Prisoners have a debt when they leave, based on how many indigent items are purchased," Morse said. Those offenders who have earned some funds don't have those debts, and are even able to pay for a first month's rent when they leave, in addition to helping their families.

Approximately 4,000 orders come from Monroe Correctional Complex. Offenders take items from bins strategically placed along a supply line, organized by item type, weight and order frequency. One order is filled in around 20 to 30 seconds from several workers placed down the line. Hygiene items are placed throughout the line, as they are ordered on a regular basis. Scattering them helps to speed up order fulfillment, Morse said.

Operations at Correctional Industries were consolidated earlier this year from running separately at facilities across the state to having a more streamlined operation. The result has been a drastic drop from 29 grievances from January to June and only 10 grievances from July through November.

Before the consolidation, only one unit's order per week could be filled at the Airway Heights commissary. Today, the 31 employed offenders are able to fill six units' orders each day.

"Our biggest product is the offender that gets released," Parker said.

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